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ABSTRACT

To develop a descriptive model of the newswriting process, a study used protocol analysis methodology (focusing on specific thinking and behavior related to task completion) to examine the writing processes of professional and student reporters writing in their natural work environment. The study employed verbal protocols--tape recording the writing process while the subject thought out loud. Eight professional reporters from seven different newspapers and five journalism students from different classes, who were selected as good writers, participated in the study. Subjects wrote 38 stories in 38 taping sessions averaging two hours in length, for a total of 70 hours of tape recordings of the newswriting process. Each subject was interviewed after stories were completed. Transcriptions of the follow-up interviews, in addition to writing session transcriptions, reporters' notes, and completed stories, were used for the analysis. The descriptive model, developed from these sessions and reflecting the actions that take place when the writer begins to write, indicated that the lead-writing task for news stories is an independent act which must be completed before the main text of the story is produced. Text production was a recursive, hierarchical set of tasks, in some ways similar to other composition models, but unique in the use of memory, editing, and lead writing. The model illustrates that the actual writing process is a complex set of many activities, all directed to the task of writing. (Six illustrations are included, and 24 references are attached.) (MM)

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ABSTRACT

Studies of the newswriting process using protocol analysis as a methodology reveal it as a complex set of tasks orchestrated to produce text. A descriptive model has been designed based on studies of professional and student writers writing in their natural work environment.

The model illustrates the importance of the lead as a self-directed activity which leads writers to a sense of direction for the story. The text production is a recursive, hierarchical set of tasks in some ways similar to other compositon models, but unique in the use of memory, editing, and lead writing.

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PAPER TITLE: Case Studies in Newswriting: A Descriptive Model

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Case Studies in Newswriting: A Descriptive Model

by

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CASE STUDIES IN NEWSWRITING: A DESCRIPTIVE MODEL

In the late 1970's a major paradigm shift occurred in the teaching of composition, from product-based to process-based analysis. Researchers developed both methodologies and theories that focused away from analysis of text and toward investigation and analysis of the writing process itself. Researchers studying the writing processes of students discovered that the process involves a complex set of goals and strategies. An understanding of how students orchestrate the writing activities has led to changes in teaching methodologies leading to much more involvement of the teacher during the time the text is being created and revised.

Little of that movement has been exhibited in journalism research or teaching methodology; our textbooks and research journals have reflected little change in the study of, or teaching of, writing the news story, and yet it is the one structure on which the skills of our discipline are based. The newswriting process is worthy of investigation if it is, in fact, the way we want our students to write.

Journalism instructors have depended on the inverted pyramid and modifications of that structure to be the model for newswriting. The inverted pyramid has served the profession well and has been modified to fit more complex news story structures. However, it is an incomplete model because it is model of the finished product, not the process used to create it. Therefore, the model doesn't provide us with much help in teaching methodology. A step beyond the inverted pyramid, to a description of the newswriting process itself, could be a

beginning to the development of teaching strategies and methodologies that would improve student writing.

This paper is a beginning in the development of a model for the newswriting process. It is based on research on the newswriting process conducted with both professional and student journalists in their normal work environment over the past six years.

BACKGROUND

A significant development in the understanding of the writing process occurred in 1979 when Linda Flower and John Hayes introduced a cognitive process model of composing based on five years of research with student writers. Their theory stated that writers are involved in a complex set of goal-directed, problem-solving tasks when they write (1979, 1980). They also found that experienced writers had developed a complex set of strategies for creating solutions to problems, but that inexperienced writers often were stopped or misdirected because they could not attend to several tasks at once.

Flowers and Hayes developed their model of the composing process (Illustration 1) which attempted to account for the processes they observed in tape recorded transcripts of writers who composed while speaking into a tape recorder (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p.7). Their cognitive process theory was based on four points: that writing is a set of distinctive thinking processes which are orchestrated during the composing process, that organizing is highly recursive, that composing is highly goal directed, and that writers generate their own goals by changing already-determined goals or by establishing new ones based on

what they have written (Flower & Hayes,1980).

Other research with student writers indicated that the review and revision processes are important to the production of good text. Sharon Pianko (1977) whose study attempted to describe the composing processes of college freshmen, concluded that "when poor writers review, they often do not rethink their compositions as competent writers do." She also created a model of the process which supported Flowers and Hayes' findings. Donald Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and researcher on the writing process, described the writing process as a search process in which the writer discovers what he or she wants to say as he writes. "Writers use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know," he said. Internal revision occurs when writers discover and develop what they want to say through reading the first draft (Murray, 1978, pp. 85-91). A significant body of research now exists that supports Flower and Hayes' model.

The studies of composing have all been based on the traditional composition essay which includes creation and selection of topic, thesis and purpose. The news story structure differs in that it is limited in purpose and structure and the subject matter is shaped as much by external events as by writer's intent.

Study of the writing processes of journalists has been less extensive than the study of general composing. Earl Conn (1968) constructed a model of the newswriting process which included all the news factors at work on the writer including news values, news judgments, and reporter role. Edward Smith suggested a

model, the "Screw Model," which used clarity of meaning and style as a guide to news story structure (1979). A number of studies have measured factors influencing reporter judgment including background (Johnstone, Stawski, and Bowman, 1976), perceived audience (de Sola Pool and Shulman, 1959), attitude toward the role of the press (Starck and Soloski, 1977), objectivity (Tuchman, 1972), news perception (Atwood, 1966), editorial structure (Johnstone, 1976), deadline pressure (Dunwoody, 1979), cognitive stress (Greenburg and Tannenbaum, 1962) and time (Pettibone, 1976).

Although many studies have helped define factors influencing reporters and differentiate story outcomes, the studies don't investigate the process of writing the story itself. It is that part of the newswriting process that this paper investigates.

PROTOCOL ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

Creation of a theory of the writing process and use of a methodology that will allow some kind of inside glimpse of the process at work are intertwined. Since writing is a highly complex and personal act, not easily researched through questionnaire or a content analysis of text, a method of analysis had to be developed that would provide some glimpse of the process at work. That methodology is protocol analysis. The methodology focuses on specific thinking and behavior related to task completion. It has been used extensively in the field of psychology to gather data about any mental tasks including problem solving. An experimental verbal protocol is a sequential record of a subject's attempts to perform a task. (Ericsson & Simon, 1980).

The use of verbal protocols in the writing process involves the tape recording of the writing process while the subject "thinks out loud." Verbal protocols allow subjects to verbalize information as it passes through the short-term memory and is used in the process of completing a task. Detailed information is lost if it is not stored in the long-term memory, so attempts to remember activities after the task is completed are often futile. The verbal protocol captures a more complete record of the activities, because they are gathered on the tape during the writing process.

Flower and Hayes developed the use of verbal protocols to study the writing process. They suggested four uses for protocol data: exploratory studies which attempt to describe activities, studies which attempt to create hypotheses, comparative studies, and studies which lead to the creation of models.

Protocol studies have been criticized because they cannot capture a total record of the workings of the mind (Steinberg, 1986). However, no method of data gathering captures all that a subject is thinking. The purpose of the protocol, it is argued, is to gather a more accurate record of a process than can be provided by recall (Dobrin, 1986). Although a subject will not state every thought during the writing process, through continuous verbalizing he or she captures kinds and sequences of activities. Verbal protocols, then, provide a map of the process of writing.

Tapes of the writing process are transcribed and analyzed for both type and relationship of activities. From the protocol analysis comes a description of the writing process. Flower and

Hayes developed a coding scheme based on the activities they observed. (Illustration 2).

Protocol studies of the newswriting process of professional reporters were first conducted in 1982 (Pitts). In that initial study, the coding scheme of Flower and Hayes was modified to account for different activities found in newswriting (Illustration 3). That initial study used three experienced reporters who wrote in their own newsroom environment on regular deadline. A replication of that study using three film reviewers for newspapers was conducted by de la Torre (1984). Since that data was not directly related to the writing of the news story, it is not included in this analysis. However, results supported the findings of the 1982 study,including the importance of the lead-writing activity and the recursive nature of the writing process itself.

Another replication of the 1982 study using five student journalists was conducted in 1986 by Pitts and Ieron.

In addition, protocol data from five more professional journalists was gathered and analyzed for this study.

In total, eight professional reporters participated in the studies reported on here. The purpose of the studies was to gain knowledge of how successful writers went through the process of producing news stories. Writers with different educational backgrounds were selected so a specific educational methodology would not infulence the outcome.

Twenty-five protocol taping sessions were conducted in the newsroom setting under normal working conditions, producing 500 pages of transcription for analysis. All of the protocols were

taken during normal working hours while reporters worked on their regular assigned stories. Stories produced as part of the studies were all published in the newspapers. All of the participating reporters had at least three years' experience and were selected for the studies as good writers by their editors or writing coaches. The eight reporters worked for seven different newspapers. All had college degrees in journalism; only two attended the same university. They ranged in age from 24 to 34.

The five journalism students also reported on in this paper were selected by newswriting instructors as good writers. They were all students who had completed half of the basic newswriting course. Each student had a different instructor for the newswriting course so a specific teaching methodology would not influence the outcome. The news stories they wrote were stories they were working on for class assignments.

All of the protocols from the studies, including the 15 protocols from the five professional journalists gathered specifically for this report, were coded and verified by at least one additional coder. In total, seven different coders coded protocols. Inter-coder reliability was above the 90% level in every protocol.

In total, 13 subjects wrote 38 stories in 38 taping sessions averaging two hours in length for a total of 70 hours of tape recordings of the newswriting process at work. The tapes were transcribed producing 700 pages of transcripts for analysis. Transcribed tapes ranged in length from 10 to 35 pages each. Each subject was interviewed after stories were completed. The completed stories ranged from hard news, to news analysis, to

news series, to news feature stories. Length of completed stories ranged from 12 to 25 column inches. Transcriptions of follow-up interviews in addition to the transcriptions from the writing sessions, reporters' notes and completed stories were used for the analysis.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The transcribed protocols provide a researcher with a map of the activities in each writing session as they occurred. Frequency of activities, relationship to other activities, length of time spent on activities, and the nature of those activities is visable in the protocols. A sample page from a protocol (Illustration 4) indicates how this information appears in the transcripts.

Frequency of activities was calculated; but since each protocol is the map of an individual's work on a unique story, the relevance of frequency is only useful in relationship to the other activities that occurred in that particular protocol. The frequencies (Illustration 5) do illustrate how much writers depend on rereading and internal editing to keep on track in their stories.

Value in analyzing the protocols is in the relationship of activities, relative time spent on activities, and nature of the activities, because that information can be compared and generalized to begin to induce patterns of the process. The 1982 report (Pitts) provides a detailed description of those activities. It is the purpose of this report to move beyond the description to the next step suggested by Flower and Hayes, the designing of models.

The descriptive model of the newswriting process illustrated here (Illustration 6) is based on what was observed in all of the newswriting sessions. It illustrates the sequence and relationship of events observed.

DISCUSSION OF THE MODEL

It is apparent from the studies that information gathering or reporting and writing are not separate acts but are closely tuned to each other. Many reporters said they began thinking about their leads during the reporting process. It still is clear, however, that the writing itself has a distinct pattern for the writers. This model concentrates on the actions that take place when the writer begins to write.

As the model indicates, the lead-writing task for news stories is an independent act which must be completed before the main text of the story is produced. It is an integrated task, involving a number of activities and concluding with the writer realizing a sense of purpose the direction for the story.

The most significant conclusion from the studies is that the lead serves a more important function for the writers than just getting the attention of the audience. Although the literature in journalism and the newswriting textbooks have long recognized the importance of the lead, both have emphasized the lead's importance as an attention-getting device and as a concise capsule of the news event for the reader. The results of the data indicate that lead writing provides an additional important function for the writers. They use the lead selection and writing process to narrow down and select a concept around which the story can be built. The lead writing task is such an

important part of the story writing process that the writing of the remainder of the story does not take place until a lead of some kind is completed.

The lead writing task determines the direction that the story takes by determining what element is the most important to the story. It is the most time-consuming part of the writing process, usually taking from one-fourth to one-third of the total writing time, and the part of the process in which the most concern is given to planning and goal setting. Plans and goals discussed in the lead writing part of the process are not usually directed to the story as a whole, however. They are more closely directed to getting the lead to reflect a tone and direction for the story.

Even if the language for the lead was selected by the writer during the news-gathering process ("I knew when I heard that quote that it was my lead"), the writers in the studies still went through a reread and analysis to see if the lead they had selected still fit the tone and subject of the story.

Lead writing is not a matter of consciously selecting the 5 W and H, and it often involves the completion of several paragraphs. The lead writing activity itself--including the review of notes, memory, writing, analyzing what is written, and revising is a writer-directed activity. It ends with a sense of, "Now I know where this story is going," on the part of the writer. The writers then use the lead as a barometer on which to measure remaining parts of the story. They weigh what they have written against the tone and direction they have set through the lead. If during the writing of the story, or in the final

revision, the lead no longer seems to reflect the direction of the story, the writers will either revise the lead or edit the text. Student writers were much less able to see this connection and carry out this "connecting" act than the professionals.

It appears that it is not necessary for the newswriter to plan or organize the story in advance. Although organizaton through outlining has been a traditional part of the prewriting stage of the composition models, the newswriters do not plan or organize their stories as a whole. Traditional theories about writing have supported a linear sequence of activities that follow a plan, write, rewrite process; the newswriters do not seem to follow that sequence. They also do not consciously rank facts in order of importance as has been described in the traditional inverted pyramid structure. The writers in the studies found that organizing a story as it was being written facilitated the writing process and did not hinder their logical development of the subject.

As is illustrated in the model, the actual writing process is an intricately orchestrated and complex use of many activities all directed to the immediate task at hand which was the writing of the paragraph. The writers use a strategy for keeping the writing task going which is to concentrate on planning, writing, and editing two or three sentences at a time, the normal length of the news paragraph.

The writers in the studies write rapidly as they work through the text. They do not set goals for the entire story or worry about the value or worth of the story as they write. They do not stop to evaluate the entire story, but rather set

short-range goals and plans for the paragraph or sentence they are working on. The continually use memory, notes, analysis, planning and rereading to propel them through the writing of paragraphs. Even interruptions do not create major problems because returning to the task involves only returning to the sentence or paragraph, not the concept for the story as a whole.

Information already written in the story itself leads the writers to decide what should be written next. Paragraph ideas are spawned from previously written paragraphs or from recall and notes; each paragraph topic develops from the writer's judgment of what should logically follow what has just been written. The pattern of the writers more accurately parallels the "Screw Model" designed by Edward Smith (1979).

Memory is the writers' most valuable tool for obtaining information during the writing process. Recall is initiated through cues provided by the notes. Recall of a general idea often leads writers back to notes for detail. Memory helps recreate detailed mental scenes and dialogue for writers which the writers then translate into text. The close link between recall and notes is apparent in every transcript.

In the development of the main text of the stories, the writers use what they have already written to help them discover what they want to say. Much of the rereading that occurs is in very small chunks of one or two sentences. At times, writers write only part of a sentence without knowing what the remaining part of the sentence will say. The rereading then generates ideas for completing the thought.

Two kinds of editing take place, editing for revision and

editing for polish. Although it might be assumed that editing for revision and direction for the story occurs during a final read-through and edit, that activity takes place more frequently during the writing of the story. The writers revise for meaning during the development of text when they continually reread, check notes, recall, state short-term goals or plans and analyze to make sure what they have written fits the direction they have shaped for the story during the lead-writing process.

The second kind of editing--for spelling, style, punctuation, and polish--occurs both during the writing process and during the final read-through. At least one final read-through of the complete story is a part of the process. Some writers reread their stories two or three times. The final read-through is a check; writers look primarily for continuity and focus of the story. They will say, for instance, "O.K. now let's see if this works." Although editing for polish is also done in the final read-through, the focus seems to be more on the story as a whole.

All of the activities described in the model are also evident in student writing. The level of complexity of the tasks seems to be the primary difference between the student and professional newswriters, not the lack of any of the activities. Students, for instance, were much less likely to read though their stories for a sense of continuity; in their rereading, they tend to look for error more than for clarity of meaning.

The newswriting process described in this model parallels in some ways the models of writing developed by the composition researchers discussed earlier. The newswriting process is

recursive, like the composition models; imbedding of a number of repeated activities in the development of the text is common. The newswriting process is also hierarchical rather than linear in the relationship of activities. There is no simple plan--write--rewrite/edit structure; a variety of activities is integrated in the entire process.

The writers rarely verbalize thoughts about the audience. Because newspaper audiences are for the most part unchanging, it could be that the concept of audience is part of the task environment the writer brings to the story without a continuing conscious awareness of it. When they are asked about who they thought of as their audience, most say they use themselves as a sample audience. "If I can understand it, then I know my readers can," one said. It could be that the strong use of rereading is the way the writers make their text public by measuring it from a reader's point of view. Student writers also do not verbalize a continuing awareness of audience; when they do, it usually was the teacher as audience, as might be expected.

CONCLUSION

Unique activities for the newswriting process are the integrated process of writing the lead, the value of the lead-writing activity for the writer, the strong use of recall, the development of only short-term goals and plans, and the integrated use of rereading and editing as part of the writing process.

Information about the newswriting process of successful writers as described in this model and in the studies from which

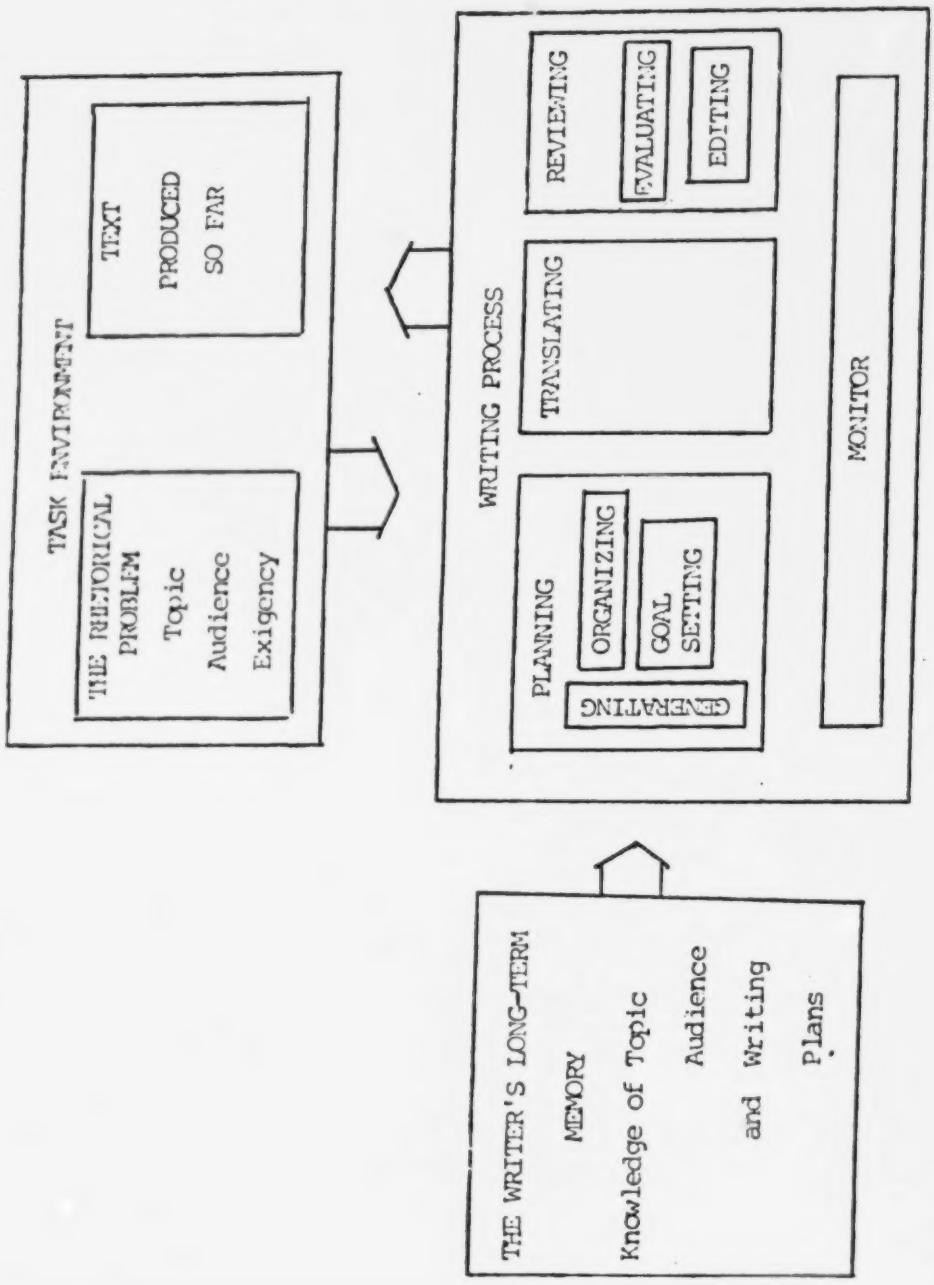
it was extracted can be useful for both research and for teaching methodology. The model and the activities which are part of the model can and should be tested through further research. Comparative studies of students and professionals is needed to gain knowledge of how the process is learned. Comparative studies of successful writers and students can also help isolate activities that are more difficult to master so teaching strategies can focus on those areas.

One area where teaching strategies can broaden students' concept of how stories are written is in the teaching of the lead. If the focus of instruction in lead writing is on the writer rather than the reader, students may be better able to learn lead writing as the point at which the story gains focus, direction, and tone.

An understanding of how writers put stories together can lead teachers to new teaching methodologies which incorporate more interaction between teacher and student during the writing process. Teaching strategies which incorporate more activities related to editing for revision during the writing process, developing a sense of direction for the story during the lead-writing process, and recognizing all the activities used in the writing process may aid in improving the teaching of newswriting. In any case, this initial model demonstrates that stories don't just fall on the page in order of importance of facts. The act of newswriting is complex, integrated and unique. It is worth our further study.

ILLUSTRATION 1

Structure of the Writing Process



Flower and Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," p. 7.

CODING SCHEME

Symbol	Activity	Explanation
underlining	writing	words said out loud as they are being typed into the text—may not include all words which appear in finished story
1	reading/reviewing notes	looking back through parts or all of the information gathered for story
2	recalling	remembering information from the news gathering process
3	analyzing/evaluating	determining meaning, relationships, relevance, importance of information gathered for the story
4	goal setting	determining desired outcome, determining what needs to be accomplished or what should not be done to all or any part of the task—decisions related to outcomes involving self, meaning, of text itself
5	planning/organizing	determining strategies to use to meet goals, to carry out desired outcomes, complete the task at hand
6	translating	determining vocabulary and syntax needed, creating sentences
7	editing	making changes in written material, adding to, deleting, or replacing written material
8	reviewing/rereading text	rescanning or rereading parts or the whole written text
9	evaluating text	making value statements about the written text or parts of the text, determining worth of written material
10	adding new information	drawing on past experiences or knowledge, or drawing on new stories to add information or insight during the writing process
11	considering sources	recognition of, judgment of, evaluation of, or consideration of any source or sources of information for the story
12	considering audience	referring to any potential reader of the story including editor or staff, sources, or general audience

ILLUSTRATION 2

Definition of Terms for Coding Scheme

notes ----------Looking back through parts of all of the information gathered for the story

recalling -------Remembering information from the news gathering

analysis -------Determining meaning, relationships, relevance, importance of information gathered

goal setting ----Determining desired outcome, determining what needs to be accomplished or what should not be done to all or any part of the task, decisions related to outcomes

strategies/planning ------Determining strategies to meet goals, to carry out desired outcomes, complete the task

translation -----Determining vocabulary, syntax before writing

process editing--Making changes in written material during the writing process

final editing----Making changes in written material after story is complete

rereading--------Rescanning or rereading parts of the whole text

evaluating-------Making value statement about the text or part of text, determining worth of written material

sources----------Recognition of, judgment of evaluation of, consideration of any source for story

audience --------Referring to any potential reader including editor, sources, or general audience

full read-through--Rereading of entire story

interruptions----Any break in the writing process

ILLUSTRATION 3

transcription page 19

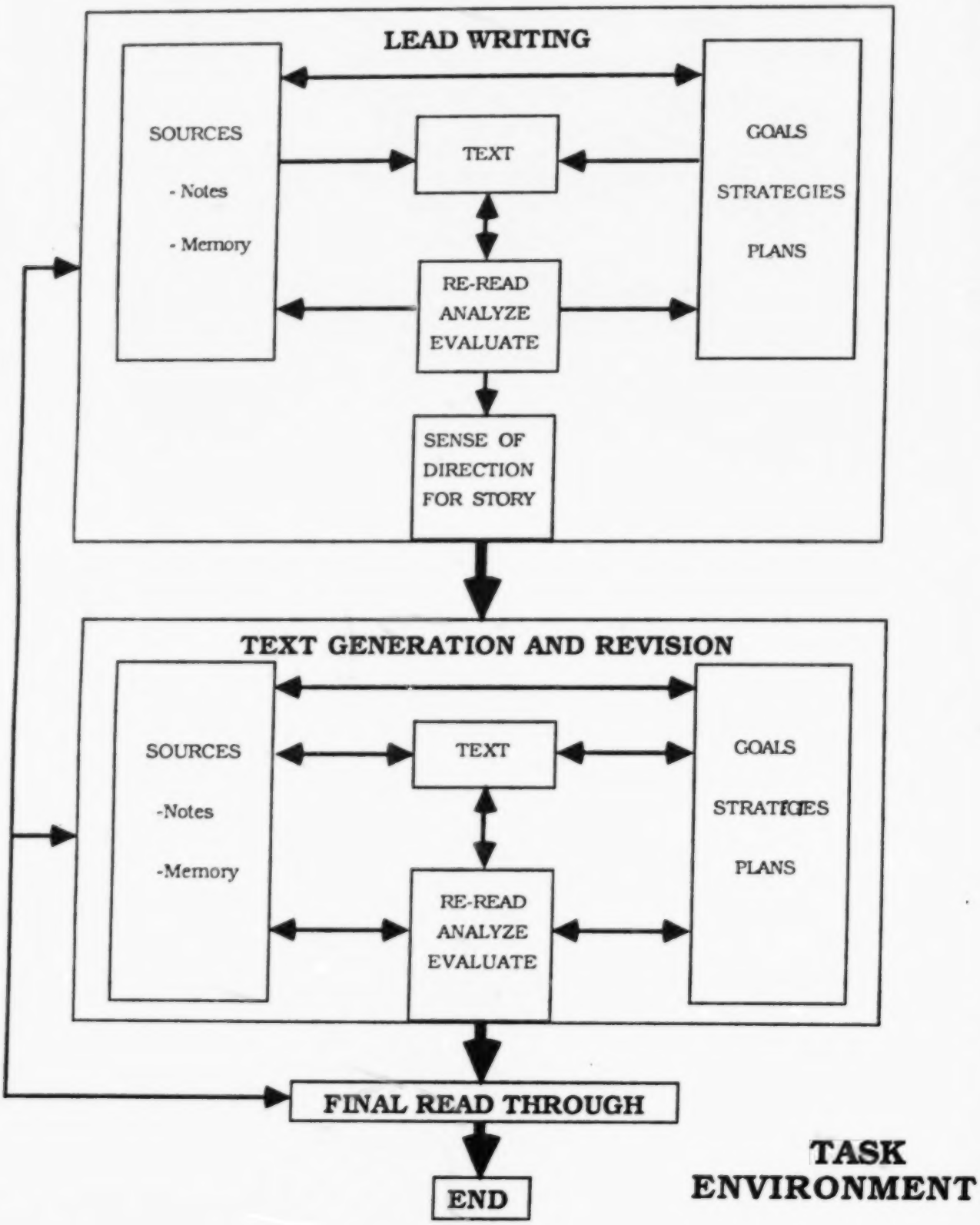
employing hundreds of per - hundreds of persons right here in Anderson -
o.k. could have the potential - to be a national corporation employing
hundreds of persons (7 right here in Anderson) - (7 and may stretch) (8 its
tentacles nationwide) - o.k. - (8 Kane feels a certain obligation locally -
since it was GM here who gave me the start - they believed in me -
but he doesn't particularly believe in Anderson) - (7 no - no - no)
(subject chuckles) oh geez - (8 the city right now is at ground zero -
o.k. he said - and all the bad publicity has hurt me already I've
had trouble hiring some people - we are ready to make the but) - o.k.
(7 we'll just - add the word - but) - (1 quoting him out of context a little
bit - he won't get upset) - (8 but we are ready to make the commitment
to expand here - to stay here) - (7 he said) - ha ha - ha ha - o.k. - (4 all
I have to do is incorporate - some description in what he now has -
from memory - and notes) - geminy - (4 I should call the man - and ask
him - what exactly he means by research - facility) - (3 since - I
was thinking in the terms of analytical - and never really caught
the gist of this - until I pick this - press release - up) - (1 research -)

ILLUSTRATION 4

Mean scores and ranges for each subject

	subject 1		subject 2		subject 3		subject 4	
	M	R	M	R	M	R	M	R
category								
notes	28	24-30	20	12-25	8	0-16	14	11-17
recall	3	0-11	3	0- 4	.6	0- 2	4	2- 5
analysis	36	20-48	15	9-21	10	2-27	9	9-10
goals	9	5-14	15	7-21	6	2-15	11	9-13
strategies	18	13-25	26	21-33	15	9-21	11	9-12
translation	6	1-16	5	2- 9	3	0- 5	11	9-13
process								
editing	27	16-45	14	12-17	13	6-25	21	15-27
final								
editing	14	6-26	6	0-15	11	7-18	14	5-22
rereading	36	17-52	4	3- 7	7	2-13	8	7-10
evaluating	16	9-32	11	10-13	8	2-16	13	12-13
sources	8	1-17	3	0- 6	0	0	2	0- 3
audience	1	1- 2	3	0- 5	.4	0- 2	0	0
full read-								
through	3	2- 5	2	1- 2	2	2- 3	2	2- 3
interrupt.	6	3-10	4	3- 4	3	0-10	3	2- 4

ILLUSTRATION 5


LEAD WRITING
SOURCES
- Notes
- Memory
TEXT
GOALS
STRATEGIES
PLANS
RE-READ
ANALYZE
EVALUATE
SENSE OF
DIRECTION
FOR STORY
TEXT GENERATION AND REVISION
SOURCES
-Notes
-Memory
TEXT
GOALS
STRATEGIES
PLANS
RE-READ
ANALYZE
EVALUATE
FINAL READ THROUGH
END
TASK
ENVIRONMENT

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